THE POET IN GRAY
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The Waving Gallery
Mervyn Taylor
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The cover of *The Waving Gallery*, Mervyn Taylor's fifth book of poetry, shows an illustration by the author. A row of people are clad in their Sunday best. Those in the middle wave tissues and clasp shoulders, their faces and form already blotchy and obscure. What looks like water or a gust of air undulates beneath them. The moment is depicted in the eponymous poem, where family members gather to wish Taylor farewell. In 1964 Taylor left Trinidad for the first time to go to Howard University in Washington DC. He watches his mother in her favorite dress and her friend Doris, "a white kerchief dabbing at her eyes" from the height of a plane. He makes out children below, and houses. He is "going away to study English, as if / it were not the language spoken here."

The consequences of that departure suffuse the book, as does the question of the use of language in the face of time's upheavals. *The Waving Gallery* is divided into three sections, "Leaving," "Overstayed," and "In Transit," each lengthier than the one preceding. "In Transit" is nearly as long as the other two combined, as though after the initial severance of emigration one were always divided, never at rest. The book ranges across myriad, shifting American terrains—from the Washington DC of his student days to his adopted home in Brooklyn, even to a dry Sedona of the mind, where an ex-lover makes her home. But Taylor's gaze is drawn inexorably back to the lush fifty square miles of Trinidad, where the radio picks up Spanish from Venezuelan stations and French from St. Lucia.

There is a capaciousness to time as well as to place in *The Waving Gallery*. The book insistently explores the way experiences are mediated by art and by memory. Taylor describes first seeing snow in the 1954 movie *Young at Heart*, when Frank Sinatra crashes his car in a blizzard. Whenever real snow is mentioned later in the book, it will have the melancholy resonance of his youth in Trinidad. In one poem about his student days, he and friends sing a Calypso song (testing "the power of the lyric to comfort") while snow falls around them on the 16th Street bridge in Washington DC. Later, he sits with fellow retirees at a birthday

party, naming calypso songs and singers, "toasting our aches and pains." A description of his father's face will recede into a meditation on his death; a poem about a long-ago girlfriend sits near one about a grandson.

Throughout the book, Taylor writes about the memories of other immigrants—Trinidadian cousins, Haitian author Edwidge Danticat, the West Indian doorman in his building—so the jolts of relocation and inner layering of memory and culture take on a choric intensity, belonging to a host of friends, family, and passersby as much as to Taylor himself. Had Marie and Juan stayed in Haiti and the Dominican Republic, he muses, they never would have met. Taylor imagines the dictator Trujillo looming in Marie's mind, her eyes focused "on the sharp edge of a machete." Instead, he observes,

here you are, dancing a *bachata*
in Brooklyn.

The step is fast,
the zombie from the past
trying to keep up.

Taylor's images are subtle, at once lightly held and deeply felt. His best poems have an opaque, haunted quality. The beauty and precision of his language can belie dark doings. Taylor has written that immersing himself in poetry as a young man (teachers included Sterling Jones and Amiri Baraka) enabled him gradually to find his idiom and immerse himself in the past: "I walked backward to be present at the death of those whose lives I'd missed. I put on the costume and took part in the Carnival, witnessing how hard it is to write with a bear claw, or half drunk in the town." But in *The Waving Gallery* the transformation often has a melancholy undertow, a sense of witnessing the past but being unable to alter it. The sense that the poems are narrated across large temporal and geographic distances gives them the aura of mourning, even as they reckon with violence. In "Speech," Taylor and his friends who emigrated before the instability of Trinidad in the 1970s "hear about raids / not far from where we grew up":

While we were learning to battle
snowdrifts and subway crowds,
back home the boys were leading
marches that didn't have far to go,

every direction ending at the sea.

In an example of his seamless weaving of patios with pared down language, Taylor

likens this political violence to Carnival. Whenever he and his friends return, an Indian dancing "with plenty mirrors … throws down the challenge / of speech and spear." They "squirm in shame, having / forgotten the warrior's words." That the sense of shame and loss take shape over the question of language is significant. Just as in "The Waving Galley," with its bittersweet observation about ostensibly leaving a former British colony to learn English," Taylor suggests that he lost something vital even as he grew into his poetic vocation.

The poem "Embassy" looks more pointedly at his ambivalence about the mobility he has gained. Walking across the Trinidadian savannah at dawn, he sees "the applicants for visas / lined up in the dark." Most of them, he knows, won't get through, and will "go home dejected, postponing / the long-distance call to Brooklyn." In "Post Mistress" he is told to stop mailing things back to Trinidad because his packages arrive months late, opened and accompanied by "a scribbled note, / Damaged in Handling." Instead, his correspondent describes a neighbor crossing the street with freshly baked bread. The image is accompanied by a sense of the practical and profound communal pleasures that could not be sent home, do not exist in the atomized US.

Taylor's mesmeric images and his probing of the way that beauty and privation mix in Trinidad is explored most profoundly in "The Mentor." The longest poem in the book, "The Mentor" uses color to startling effect:

In this dream there were
cows in every field,
and clouds floating above
an island so green,

it seemed made of gases.
And out of this arose the
poet, in a grey suit,
as spry as I've ever

seen him, quoting his
mischievous lines,
tieless, sparkling with
metaphor …

As the dream goes on, violence gathers around: in an unspecified neighborhood, a man beats an old, bedridden woman to death with a wheelbarrow handle. The family next door conceals the person the man intended to kill and listen in rapt silence. The third part of the poem takes an aerial view: the brown and white

backs of cows are seen from above on undulating land. People in black follow funerals and fathers refuse to accept each other's apologies:

…They turn their
backs, have conversations
with their dead sons as they
are lowered, earth tamped.

Ah, the poet smiles his
ineffable smile; those adverbs
he warned against shuffle up.
What will we do with them,

now that he is going, trailing
long verses, the islands strung
like cans behind a wedding,
bells pealing in chapels…

The image of the islands transforming into cans behind a wedding, trailing a formidable imagination, is one of the most memorable in the book. The colors already mixed in the poem—Trinidad's supple green and mourner's black—are added onto as Taylor describes "Sunday's blood" held high in silver chalices inside the churches, where sunlight beats through stained glass and parables about sacrifice recall "gold and greed." The Biblical stories mingle with, become indistinguishable from, Trinidad's culture of

vengeance where

the washing of hands
goes on, governors
and guards swearing
each other away, poets

swearing out poems like
warrants, charges read
in the language of verse,
the one in gray citing

history and places
in the landscape that
hold titles and deeds,
the right to dream.

The Waving Gallery is Mervyn Taylor's reckoning with the inheritance that limns the dreamscapes of his life. The book is often a tribute—to Trinidad, but even more so to the mentors, family, and friends who have given him "the right to dream." He in never unaware of the responsibility imparted by their inspiration. As he carries on this work and renders the past into poetry, the task is at once sad and fond, a wedding and a wake.